



January 14, 2009

Help with heat bills is on the way

State gets increase in aid, applications

By Jenny Upchurch
THE TENNESSEAN

Many more Tennesseans will get help paying utility bills this year for two reasons: The state has three times the federal money to distribute and applications for aid have jumped dramatically.

"We hope to more than double the number helped this year, at least 120,000 households," said Michelle Mowery Johnson, spokeswoman for the state Department of Human Services.

Tennessee is part of a record surge nationwide of people in need of help staying warm. About 7.3 million households are expected to get fuel aid this winter, a 25 percent increase, according to a survey released Monday by the National Energy Assistance Directors' Association.

Statewide, Tennessee has seen a 40 percent increase in requests for aid, with a 22 percent increase in Nashville in the past six months. The Metro Action Commission has already assisted 6,000 households since July 1, more than all who received aid in the entire previous year, says spokeswoman Lisa Gallon.

The Nashville agency expects to help 8,360 households with the money allocated, \$5.36 million, compared to \$2.2 million last year.

In recent years, thousands who were eligible for aid went without in Tennessee because the federal funds ran out.

This year, agencies hope the extra money will leave out fewer. But, Johnson said, "there's never enough money for the need out there."

Priority goes to the disabled, the elderly and families with children 5 and younger. "They go to the head of the line because they are the most in need, the most fragile," she said.

The federal government last fall nearly doubled fuel assistance, releasing \$5.1 billion to states. Tennessee received \$80 million, almost triple its allocation of Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program money last year. The human services department allocates the federal aid to 19 community service agencies.

To extend the heating aid, Gov. Phil Bredesen announced last month that the state would use \$5 million of the federal heat aid to match private contributions. The state will match \$2 for every \$1 from a private source, such as a utility-sponsored charity. For example, Metro Action can draw down as much as \$460,000 to match contributions.

More requests for help

Some money is also being held back to help with air conditioning bills this summer.

In Nashville, Gallon said, requests for help with rent and mortgage payments are increasing along with requests for help with utility bills, and many people are first-time applicants.
